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# **One step forward, two tweets back: Exploring cultural backlash and hockey masculinity on Twitter**

## **Abstract**

Between 2000 and 2018, the number of fights in professional hockey decreased by more than half, reflecting rule changes intended to preserve player health. A 2019 playoff fight ignited debate on social media over the place of fighting in hockey. This research involved a content analysis of an incendiary tweet and the 920 replies it solicited. Content analysis confirmed that cultural backlash exists in sport, and provided insight into manifestations of backlash. Comments exhibiting backlash varied by subject (i.e. what or who is being discussed in the tweet) and attitude (i.e. positive approval for fighting, negative attitude toward change), with many defending hockey masculinity (Allain, 2015). Connections are drawn to manifestations of backlash in the political realm, the extant hockey masculinity literature, and implications for sociological theory and the sport of hockey are discussed.

**Keywords:** cultural backlash, hockey, Twitter, fighting, masculinity

## **Introduction**

Fighting has traditionally played an important role in North American hockey culture, most visibly in the National Hockey League (NHL) (Bernstein, 2013; Colburn, 1985). Hockey is the only North American professional team sport where fighting does not result in automatic ejection from the game, and for most of the NHL's history, fighting and the role of the enforcer, whose primary role on the team is to fight, were celebrated (Goldschmied & Espindola, 2013). Many hockey players, fans, and media members continue to support fighting and physical play, and position these aspects of the sport as vital to hockey's cultural importance (Allain, 2015).

However, recently, the role and prevalence of fighting in the NHL has diminished: in the 2000-2001 season, there were 0.56 fights per game; by 2017-2018, that number dropped to 0.22 (Wyshynski, 2018). This reduction comes in response to changing opinions and norms about the purpose and place of fighting in the sport, as well as to changing ideas about roster construction and the value of enforcers (Caron & Bloom, 2013; Wyshynski, 2018). As knowledge of the damaging consequences of fighting and violence in hockey became mainstream, "hooting at two men pounding each other senseless no longer seemed cool" (Kelly, 2017). Inspired by these shifting public opinions of fighting, and following the deaths of several retired NHL enforcers, the NHL began paying more attention to concussions and head injuries (Beaver 2018; Kelly, 2017; Smith, Farrell, Roberts, Moris, & Stuart, 2019), and the role of fighting in promulgating such injuries. The league has taken steps to render the game less violent, with a view of protecting athlete health (Scanlan, 2006). For example, in 2005, the NHL changed its rules to make the game faster and more skill-based, removing the value of slower, stronger players, especially those whose main purpose was fighting (Wyshynski, 2018). Overall, fighting in professional hockey has been significantly reduced in the last 20 years, as have some of the more

violent parts of the game (Wyshynski, 2018) emblematic of hockey's culture of masculinity and toughness (Allain, 2008; Gee, 2009; Haché, 2002).

It is important to reiterate that this shift toward a faster, more skill-based game free of fighting does not enjoy unanimous support. For some fans and participants, reduced fighting is an unwelcome, radical change to hockey culture, as the sport has historically embodied a “culture of toughness” (Haché, 2002) and “warrior” masculinity (Allain, 2008; Gee, 2009). This understanding of hockey masculinity is reflected in the views held by Don Cherry, a celebrated but controversial Canadian media personality (Allain, 2015; Gillet et al., 1996) who, between 1980 and late 2019, starred in the hugely popular *Coach's Corner* show on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) flagship *Hockey Night in Canada* (Allain, 2015). Cherry celebrates fighting, body contact, the ability to continue playing while injured, and respecting “the code” of hockey, the unofficial norms of NHL player conduct where players should be expected and forced to fight if they engage in dirty or “cheap” play (Allain, 2015; Bernstein, 2006; Knowles, 1995). He has also lamented the “pansification of the game” (Allain and Dotto, 2019) at the hands of “left-wing pinkos”, calling to mind the rhetoric of those on the populist right who position masculinity as in crisis. Over almost 40 years, Cherry has been able to position his views as emblematic of “real hockey”, which is played by “real men” (Campbell et al., 2006) who uphold “old school hockey values” (Allain 2015, 124). This “hockey masculinity”, defined by Allain (2015) as “a sense of masculine style linked to hitting, fighting, and physical confrontation” (119), is inconsistent with some of the ongoing changes to rules and norms in the NHL described above. For the purposes of this analysis, all forthcoming references to “hockey masculinity” reflect Allain's (2015) definition above.

Those who ascribe to this notion of hockey masculinity also argue that without fighting, the game might be *more* dangerous, as the fear of having to engage in a fight deters players from illegal body checks, attacks using one's stick, and other "dirty" plays (The Canadian Press, 2013). Cherry and others who hold similar views present this argument as evidence for the importance of "the code", described above. While empirical evidence confirms that stick incidents and body checks, especially those to the head, can be injurious (Popkin et al., 2017; Tuominen, Stuart, Aubry, Kannus, & Parkkari, 2015), body checks and fighting cause the most harmful injuries. Body checks are responsible for most concussions (Pauelsen, Nyberg, Tegner & Tegner, 2017) and hockey injuries in general (Flik et al., 2005; Molsa et al., 2003), because there are many more body checks in a game compared to the number of fights. A study presented at the Ice Hockey Summit in 2015 found the elimination of fighting to be among the three highest priority items necessary to reduce concussions and head injuries (Smith et al., 2015), at all levels of play.

While the dominant trend in the NHL is towards less fighting, the rare incidences of fighting in hockey reignite debates on its role in hockey. These debates, in turn, can result in backlash from those who believe fighting should be an integral part of hockey, especially if they feel as though their opinions and views are under attack. In the sport context specifically, both Allain (2015) and Kusz (2008) have documented the rising perception that masculinity is in crisis, and at risk of being replaced. Cherry echoes this point, as he positions "normative (hockey) masculinity as being "under attack by bourgeois forces, namely corporate interests and the educated elite" (Allain, 109). This idea of a culture under attack, or those who ascribe to certain beliefs feeling left behind, is commonly cited in studies of populist political backlash (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Manfredo et al., 2017), where "those left behind in a shifting culture

act in opposition to change for the purpose of retaining their cultural identity and values” (Manfredo et al. 2017, 303). Just as populist political backlash has arisen as a result of certain populations feeling passed over socially and culturally by political establishments, backlash may arise from hockey fans who feel that their conception of hockey culture and masculinity is similarly being left behind, a point echoed in other sport research (Leifso, 2019).

### **The Context**

During the 2019 NHL playoffs, a fight between NHL veteran Alexander Ovechkin (Washington Capitals) and rookie Alexei Svechnikov (Carolina Hurricanes) provoked pro and anti-fighting commentary in the hockey community. After a series of missed blows from both participants, and very little of the defensive grabbing and blocking maneuvers common to more experienced fighters, Ovechkin connected on a punch to Svechnikov’s jaw, and the young forward crumbled to the ice, knocked unconscious. The visceral nature of such a clean knockout, coupled with the rarity of fighting in the playoffs in general (Klein, 2010), and especially between two players like Ovechkin and Svechnikov, resulted in the perfect bite-sized, viral video clip. While Ovechkin is one of the NHL’s biggest stars, he is known for his goal scoring prowess, and has only been in one other fight (in 2010) in his 16-year NHL career. Svechnikov, a rookie at the time, is also not known as a fighter or enforcer, and had never participated in a fight. Both players are also Russian, which, due to common depictions of Russian players in North American hockey (informed in large part by Cherry), added further intrigue to the altercation. Fighting is not allowed in European hockey, and historically, Russian players have been labeled as “skill players” who do not engage in physical play and are especially unlikely to fight (Allain, 2008; Grossman and Hines, 1996).

Tweets showing the video or commenting on the event spawned a myriad of responses. Discourse included expressions of excitement and awe at Ovechkin's fighting prowess, to discussions over who initiated the fight and who was to blame for the resulting injury, to dismay that fighting is still allowed in the NHL. One tweet by journalist Paul Campbell was particularly popular, attracting the highest engagement among Twitter posts on the subject. Responses to this tweet were mixed: some agreed with him, most did not. This provided a potential context to observe cultural backlash. Campbell's tweet read: "Fucking stomach-churning. Who likes this? Who wants this? The NHL could end this archaic bullshit tomorrow, if it weren't afraid to lose its very worst "hockey" fans" (hereafter "fight tweet") (Campbell, 2019). By questioning the place of fighting in professional hockey, which could also be perceived as an attack on hockey masculinity, Campbell attracted 920 responses.

#### Insert Figure 1

Based on an analysis of the responses to the fight tweet, we contend that cultural backlash is not unique to politics, nor to broad societal changes; it simply requires the presence of a tradition-bound cultural practice at risk of or having already undergone a radical change, such as the role of fighting in hockey. Through thematic coding and categorization of the responses, we extend the extant literature on cultural backlash and hockey masculinity by demonstrating how backlash manifests in the context of sport, particularly on social networking platforms such as Twitter. We demonstrate that backlash is occurring against recent changes to hockey (i.e. rule changes around fighting, reduced aggressive confrontations) by those fans and players who espouse the culture of hockey masculinity. We show that this backlash can be expressed in different ways, varying by subject, attitude, tone, and intent.

This work is important for three key reasons. First, we show how cultural backlash occurs in sport, which carries lessons and implications for league officers, managers and coaches as they navigate future rule and culture changes that may spur similar backlash. Second, we link this backlash to literature in crisis masculinity (Allain, 2015; Kusz, 2008), which has important implications for understanding how threats to masculinity are perceived and responded to in both the sport context and beyond. Third, this work signals the emergence of a new form of hockey masculinity that eschews fighting and aggression in favor of a safer form of play. This new form of masculinity competes but coexists with the hockey masculinity described by Allain (2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western societies underwent a cultural transformation that has seen growing support for progressive social justice initiatives and increased autonomy and self-expression (Inglehart, 2008). This transformation is exemplified by heightened tolerance and open-mindedness towards people of all genders and sexual orientations (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Keleher & Smith, 2012), as well as toward people with differing lifestyles, habits, values, and religious beliefs (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2009; Ward, 2003). However, these developments have also inspired negative reactions among those who wish to preserve past values (Ignazi, 2003), especially those holding political and economic power (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

In 2016, Inglehart and Norris introduced the notion of cultural backlash to explain the backlash of traditionalists, linking opposition of cultural transformation to support for modern-day populist political parties. Cultural backlash, they argue, builds on the ‘silent revolution’ theory of value change which posits that previously high levels of security and assuredness



experienced by White people, especially men, in Western developed societies after World War II spurred a shift toward post-materialist values such as multiculturalism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Combined with greater access to higher education and an era of student protests, support for left-libertarian parties and progressive movements grew (Janda, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Read, 2018). However, the trend toward the proliferation of progressive social values triggered “counterrevolutionary retro backlash, especially among the older generation, white men, and less educated sectors, who sense decline and actively reject the rising tide of progressive values” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 4). Specifically, cultural backlash is best described as an expression of resent for the displacement of traditional norms in various sites and segments of society. While these authors wrote specifically about populist political support, cultural backlash has been applied by other scholars more generally to describe how people respond to changing social norms and institutions, and how people may “act in opposition to change for the purpose of retaining their cultural identity and values” (Manfredo et al. 2017, 303). For cultural backlash to exist, there must be a dominant culture, practice, policy or belief being challenged by progressive change. Cultural backlash, then, can be defined as the negative counterrevolutionary response to progressive change. Rather than examining political backlash to large-scale social and cultural changes, we analyze backlash to a public critique of hockey masculinity that unravels over social media (i.e. the Fight Tweet). This critique is also emblematic of the larger cultural shift in hockey (evidenced by reduced fighting and rule changes in the NHL) towards a less violent version of the sport, making it an ideal site to study backlash.

Due to its nascent status in the literature, manifestations of cultural backlash remain under-examined. Identifying and understanding incidents of backlash provide evidence and insight into the feelings of people whose opinions have not shifted along with changing norms.

Given the link between cultural and social changes and backlash (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), and the importance of properly navigating these changes, examining the sites, markers, and manifestations of cultural backlash is an important sociological task. Research examining cultural backlash has focused on the white racial majority in a political context (Manuel, 2017; Rocha et al., 2017; Rensmann, 2017), linking this theory to the rise of right-wing populism and anti-globalization. However, researchers have also applied the cultural backlash phenomenon to other contexts, including wildlife conservation (Manfredo et al., 2017) and changes in higher education (Read, 2017). The research has consistently borne out the supposition that cultural backlash is motivated by a shift in values, and tends to be expressed by older, generally whiter populations decrying the turn to elitist (Read, 2017), urban (Manfredo et al., 2017), liberal-cosmopolitan (Rensmann, 2017) and secular (Manuel, 2017) cultural values.

Cultural backlash has been studied using various methodological approaches. Inglehart and Norris (2016) and Manfredo and colleagues (2017) used survey data to identify cultural backlash in political supporters and amongst hunting communities (respectively). Following an entirely different approach, Carreras and colleagues (2019) examined secondary economic and electoral data and found that perceived importance of cultural backlash mediated support for Brexit. Digital platforms have been identified as plentiful sites of cultural backlash (Read, 2017) and some studies have employed content analysis of digital data to examine this phenomenon. For example, Read (2017) leveraged content from online student newspapers to unearth anti-academic backlash, and Bastos and Mercea (2017) and Robinson (2018) used Twitter data to identify cultural backlash and nationalist sentiments during political elections. Given evidence that Twitter can provide useful cases for studying cultural backlash, and the salience of Twitter

for both the dissemination of public opinion (Everbach et al., 2018) and for sports discourse (Pegararo, 2010) at large, this platform was deemed appropriate as a source of data for this study.

## **Method**

### *Case*

The fight tweet conveys a clear message against fighting and against fans that support this part of the game. This tweet thus represents a potential trigger for those who feel that their values have been replaced (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), and a potential context for cultural backlash. We conduct a case study content analysis (Yin, 2017) of the fight tweet, exploring how the replies to this tweet fit into a cultural backlash framework. This tweet reads: “Fucking stomach-churning. Who likes this? Who wants this? The NHL could end this archaic bullshit tomorrow, if it weren’t afraid to lose its very worst “hockey” fans”.

Twitter’s position in the social media landscape as a place for political and sometimes angry commentary makes it an interesting setting to conduct an analysis of cultural backlash. Since its creation in 2006, Twitter has grown as a communication tool for people of all ages, with estimates of 500 million users sending an average 500 million tweets per day (Al-garadi, Varathan & Varana, 2016). Social media, and specifically Twitter, allows for voices outside of news media and traditional media outlets to be heard by the public (Everbach et al., 2018). This has often resulted in the use of these platforms as tools to express political views and organize political movements (Hodges, 2015; Jackson & Foucault-Wells, 2015), while also acting as a virtual “water cooler” for people to communicate with each other about a variety of hobbies and interests (Shirky, 2008), including sports (Sanderson, 2011). While Twitter has its benefits as a platform for underrepresented and underserved voices, its anonymity also makes it a convenient

place to post angry, aggressive and harmful content (Cisnero & Nakayama, 2015; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015).

Purposeful sampling (Riffe et al. 2013) was used to select an appropriate Twitter thread for this study. Purposeful sampling is the practice of selecting “information-rich [cases]... from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 264). Given our research goal of exploring the potential presence of cultural backlash in sport through Twitter, we needed a case that simultaneously promoted changes already in progress in the sport and condemned hockey masculinity values and norms, while containing a sizable sample of individual comments. The fight tweet had the most Twitter “traffic” among Ovechkin-Svechnikov fight-related tweets, and contained a specific message and tone condemning fans who supported fighting in hockey and those who valued this part of the sport. As described above, the timing (the NHL playoffs), the participants (two high profile players not known for fighting), and the shocking result of the fight (a vicious knockout) combined to make this tweet particularly newsworthy.

In total, the sampled thread included 920 replies, 216 retweets, and 1800 “favourites” on this tweet. Responses to the tweet were not all posted on the same day: Twitter users continued to respond for several days after the tweet’s initial posting on April 15, 2019. Data was collected on April 23, 2019.

### *Data Collection*

To collect replies to the fight tweet, we used the Twitter utility program Twitonomy. On April 22, 2019, we searched for the last 3000 Twitter replies (limited due to program restrictions) to Campbell’s Twitter account, @WayToGoPaul. We then examined these tweets and extracted

those that were written in response to the fight tweet, yielding 920 tweets. Each tweet reply included the date, time, Twitter handle, Twitter name, tweet content, tweet URL, method of sending, and the number of retweets and favourites the tweet received. Tweets that did not contain any text, such as messages with RT (retweet) as the only piece of written text, or those containing only a link, picture, video, or emoji were removed from the analysis, as these could not be analyzed textually for the purposes of this case study. Any tweet that contained the text “RT” followed by a copy of another user’s response to the fight tweet was removed from the sample. Tweets that had been deleted by the user after their initial publishing were also removed. The final sample contained 804 textual replies to the fight tweet, a representative sample of the 920 total replies to the initial tweet.

### *Analysis*

We then used a content analysis approach to “identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton 2002, 453) for the 804 textual replies collected. Twitter content analyses have been used to examine a variety of sport issues (Hambrick et al., 2010), including how professional athlete and sports organizations use the platform to promote their brands (Hambrick et al., 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Wang & Zhou, 2015), how the public discusses concussions in sport (Sullivan et al., 2012), how fans react and engage with large sporting events (Yu & Wang; 2015), and how nonprofit sport-for-development organizations use the platform to “disseminate information, build engagement, and facilitate action” (Svensson et al., 2015).

Each tweet was inductively coded for its content and its tone by the first author. Message coding was left open-ended, allowing for content categories to emerge (Altheide, 1996). Code categories were determined after the first round of coding (see Appendix A). The second author then used the codebook developed by the first author to complete a deductive coding analysis.

Some tweets contained messages that could fall into multiple content categories and were coded with all codes that applied. Peer debriefing resolved disagreements regarding inconsistent coding (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

## Findings

We identified 14 content categories (Pegoraro, 2010), or codes, in the responses to the fight tweet. These range from tweets expressing agreement with Campbell's assessment of fighting in hockey (*fighting is bad*) or expressing understanding for why people may think fighting should be removed (*balanced take*), to tweets stating that fighting was simply part of the history, culture, and identity of hockey (*this is hockey*), questioning whether Campbell played or understood hockey (*never played*), or insulting, belittling and attacking Campbell's toughness, masculinity, and character (*belittling and attacking*). Tweets could be coded on multiple codes, as users could express multiple sentiments in one message. The 14 codes are *balanced take*, *belittling or attacking*, *consensual fight*, *fight commentary*, *fighting is bad*, *fighting is necessary*, *I like fighting*, *just don't watch*, *never played*, *people like fighting*, *this is how hockey is played*, *to each their own*, *Twitter commentary*, and *tweet disagreement*. Frequency tables for these codes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency table of codes

Code	Count	Percentage of tweets
Balanced take	20	2.51%
Belittling or attacking	180	22.56%
Consensual fight	104	13.03%
Fight commentary	38	4.76%
Fighting is bad	95	11.90%
Fighting is necessary	87	10.90%
I like fighting	52	6.52%
Just don't watch	97	12.16%
Never played	38	4.76%

People like fighting	31	3.88%
This is hockey	179	22.43%
To each their own	46	5.76%
Tweet disagreement	28	3.51%
Twitter commentary	77	9.65%
<hr/> N= 791, 7 not coded		

Of the 14 codes, 8 serve as evidence of cultural backlash: *belittling or attacking, fighting is necessary, I like it, never played, people like fighting, this is hockey, and tweet disagreement.*

Importantly, these vary by subject (i.e. what or who is being discussed in the tweet) and attitude (i.e. positive approval for fighting, negative attitude toward the change). As a result, not all tweets in this sample overly express a distaste for the cultural change itself (e.g. the shift from fighting to no fighting). Instead, some tweets focus on the person commentating (i.e. Paul Campbell), others focus on the ‘old’ culture (i.e. fighting), and others still focus on the new culture (i.e. the game of hockey with no fighting). As evidenced by the variety of cultural backlash observed in different research contexts and through different research methods examined above, backlash can present and manifest in several ways. Each code used in this analysis is described and exemplified below, with explanations of their salience in the context of cultural backlash.

The most frequently coded theme was *belittling or attacking*, which refers to tweets insulting or attacking Campbell by commenting on his gender identification, sexuality, lack of toughness and masculinity, and political correctness. These include tweets like “Shave your beard and go identify as female. #Egg”, “Ah jeez, now the snowflakes are watching hockey”, and “Change your maxi pad, Sally”, as well as referring to Campbell as “soft”, “yellow”, “beta”, “pansy”, “wimp”, “coward”, and other similar names. All tweets that referenced Campbell’s inability to “stomach” or handle violence and physical play in the sport, as well as tweets that mentioned that Campbell should switch to watching and covering a women’s sport or a passive

activity (non-sport) were also coded as such. Tweets coded in this category are indicative of cultural backlash as they attempt to discredit or discourage the person with an opposing view. This form of backlash is typical in regards to cultural shifts in political discourse toward more progressive approaches, often centered around preserving older conceptions of masculinity (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Read, 2017). In this case, the tweets targeting Campbell's perceived lack of hockey masculinity, toughness, and role as a hockey commentator are used as a means of expressing disapproval for the progressive changes in hockey, and the insulting, mocking tone of this disapproval points to backlash (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

Tweets coded as *never played* were those aimed at- or directly referencing Campbell, commenting on him never playing hockey, based on his evident distaste for the culture of fighting in the sport. Examples include "You're the reason people who didn't play the sport shouldn't be a writer about it", "you ever even put on a pair of skates let alone play hockey?", and "It's always the Nancy reporters that probably never played, that want fighting out of the game". This category of tweets is evidence of backlash as they are challenging the individual's legitimacy and by extension, their opinion. Like with *attacking and belittling* tweets, this tactic is used to discourage those with opposing views and to denounce them as not understanding the culture of the event or institution undergoing a change and is common to discourse classified as backlash (Manfredo et al., 2017).

Tweets coded as *consensual fight* and *fighting is necessary* present the argument that fighting is a product of player agency and is important to the functioning of the game of hockey, and therefore should remain a part of the sport. *Consensual fight* tweets include "he (Svechnikov) literally asked Ovechkin to go. Don't take away his agency", and "2 consenting adults. One challenged and one accepted. The 2 fought. Nobody made them do it. I see no issue".



These tweets argue that fighting is acceptable because both players consent. However, it is important to note that under hockey's 'code', where players are expected to fight if they are challenged following a perceived improper play, obtaining consent from both potential combatants is nearly impossible.

The argument in *fighting is necessary* tweets center around the fact that fighting serves as a check-and-balance mechanism for players to police other dangerous and violent acts on the ice, such as blindside body checks and incidents using one's stick: "Look at other leagues around the world that do not allow fighting... there is a much higher chance for serious injury due to cheap shots than leagues that allow fighting". These tweets are representative of cultural backlash as they voice arguments highlighting the salience and importance of hockey's culture of fighting, but in an entirely different fashion than *belittling and attacking*: rather than targeting the messenger, this form of backlash offers arguments that highlight the virtues of the 'old' culture or cultural element. These tweets are less based on personal preferences and opinions toward fighting, as they are on facts or anecdotally supported perceptions of the value of hockey masculinity. While it presents differently in hockey culture, this type of expression has been documented in populist messaging towards, for example, a return to a traditional Christian religious society in North America (Manuel 2017).

Another expression of cultural backlash came in the form of tweets expressing approval and personal preferences for fighting. *I like it* and *people like fighting* tweets were those responding to Campbell's "who likes this" prompt, with users explaining they enjoyed the fight. These include tweets like "I like it. I want it." and "Hey snowflake I love it and it's part of hockey", and were sometimes coded along with *this is hockey* or *belittling and attacking* tweets. Twitter users voiced that fighting has always been part of hockey and should not be a cause for

concern, with tweets such as “are you new to hockey or somethin”, “its hockey. Your [sic] not going to stop it.”, and “if you want ballet, go see it. Hockey is very intense, live with it!!”. Users expressing enjoyment toward fighting are aligning themselves with hockey masculinity and questioning the trend towards reduced fighting. Their backlash is evidenced by the rejection of the idea of norm change among “real” hockey fans, which they perceive to be the dominant or majority group of hockey fans who subscribe to hockey masculinity. This performance of backlash is similar to expressions by some college students that the emergence of safe spaces and cultural sensitivity (or “political correctness”) is an elitist desire (Read, 2017) that does not truly reflect the views of what they perceive as the dominant or majority group of students.

More subtle expressions of approval for fighting were uncovered in tweets coded as *this is hockey*, such as “Hockey isn't a Kumbaya sport. It's aggressive and in your face. It's been a part of hockey since day 1. Same with big hits. It's just the way of the sport and it's glorious”, and “No need to change”. Tweets coded in this category express a perception among users of the inevitability of hockey masculinity, a view that understands and appreciates hockey only in its aggressive forms. Tweets that suggest that hockey players want fighting to remain a part of the game were also coded as *this is hockey*. These include tweets like “All the players want it. Case closed” and “Find me one poll of players in which they want fighting banned. There are numerous articles from the past decade in which players clearly want it in the game”. These tweets, asserting that fighting is inextricably linked to hockey and that the players themselves want it to remain part of the sport, are a way of expressing approval for the cultural element that has been changed, and consequently, expressing backlash against its diminished role. This type of backlash against what some perceive as a fundamental part of the sport resembles populist backlash against immigration and multiculturalism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Just as right-wing

populist supporters see changes to the ethnic, racial, or religious makeup of their state as a danger to their state's national identity, those who wish for fighting to remain in hockey see its potential disappearance from the sport as a change that will alter the nature and essence of the sport.

Finally, in some cases, Twitter users expressed disagreement with the fight tweet: these were coded as *tweet disagreement*. In these tweets, disagreement or disapproval was expressed, but no explanation or counterargument was presented, and no pro-fighting comments were made. Examples include “massive cold take”, “Go away Paul”, and “put the phone down bud you’re embarrassing yourself”. Tweets coded in this category are indicative of cultural backlash as they disagree with and attempt to discredit the person presenting an opposing view, a view counter to the values of hockey masculinity.

Two other categories, *to each their own* and *just don’t watch*, do not explicitly demonstrate the user’s enjoyment of fighting, but reflect the value of personal freedom. Tweets falling under the content category *to each their own* include “pretty sure the worst fans in hockey are those who tell other fans how to fan, but continue clutching your pearls if you must” and “pipe down. Fighting is down. It’s not going anywhere. Regardless of your stance you shouldn’t degrade people cause they don’t agree with you. Generalizing people is uncalled for”, and “people rent PPV of this kind of stuff so PLENTY of people like it, just because you don’t doesn’t mean it’s wrong”. *Just don’t watch* tweets share a similar sentiment, albeit often with an angrier tone. These tweets include “go watch soccer if it hurts your tummy”, “don’t like it don’t watch, no one is forcing you to like it snowflake”, and “if you don’t like fighting then watch curling you pansy”. Tweets coded as *just don’t watch* were often combined with other codes, specifically *belittling or attacking*, and therefore still indicated feelings of backlash. Further, the

language typically used in tweets coded as *just don't watch* is particularly emblematic of the aggressive, name-calling and toxic dimensions of hockey masculinity (i.e. pansy, snowflake).

*Balanced take, fight commentary and twitter commentary* tweets did not specifically condemn or support fighting in hockey or the ideals and traditions of hockey masculinity. They do not provide evidence of cultural backlash, but rather serve as evidence that the cultural change is met with varied perspectives, opinions, and responses. *Balanced take* tweets expressed an understanding for why fighting was part of hockey, as well as why people were against it: "I can see both sides of the argument. I like a good fight once in a while in a game but I also see that the fighting marginalizes the sport and prevents it from being as popular as it should be". Tweets coded as *fight commentary* were those where the user spoke specifically about the fight itself, in terms of the combatants, the result of the fight, who instigated it, and how it happened. These tweets include "And OV says goodnight young fella. Till we meet again! #tweettweet" and "There's a reason why Ovechkin hadn't fought since 2010. Players know better. Well most anyways". *Twitter commentary* tweets were meta-commentaries on the Twitter conversation and comments already happening, neutral statements or questions on the fight tweet itself, and any tweets that were part of a larger back and forth conversation that moved past a comment to Campbell's original post. These tweets included "Hey Paul, I came for comments as genuinely not sure what I think right after that", as well as many tweets that are difficult to understand taken out of the context of the conversation that they were part of.

The last code, *fighting is bad*, contains all tweets that agree with Campbell's negative thoughts towards fighting in hockey, saying that they do not enjoy it and/or that it does not have a place in the sport. Examples of these tweets are: "I'm with you Paul. This stuff has turned me off hockey", and "Paul. I'm (we are) on the same page. It's ridiculous. I've been voicing my own

opinion on how wrong this is for a long time”. The tweets coded as *fighting is bad* represent the voices of an emerging form and performance of masculinity in hockey that supports the shift away from fighting and toward a faster, more skill-oriented game of hockey.

## **Discussion**

Collectively, our findings show that cultural backlash exists in the context of sport, that it can be found on digital platforms such as Twitter, and that cultural backlash is expressed in different ways. Specifically, the 8 codes representative of cultural backlash include some directed at the commentator or messenger (e.g. *attacking or belittling, never played*), some that express approval or praise for the cultural element that was changed based on personal preferences and opinions (e.g. *I like it, this is hockey, people like fighting*), and others yet that express their backlash in the form of arguments supporting the value or importance of the cultural element that was changed (e.g. *consensual fight, fighting is necessary*). Finally, it was sometimes the case that backlash was expressed in the form of blunt disagreement with the cultural statement or proposal (e.g. *tweet disagreement*). Though previous research has not expressly studied the expression of cultural backlash, these findings are consistent with themes uncovered in previous work on cultural backlash (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Manfredi et al. 2017).

Notably, the Fight Tweet and the responses coded at *fighting is bad* offer evidence to contest hockey masculinity (Allain, 2015; Gillet, White & Young, 1996) as the sole and dominant form of masculinity in hockey. Put simply: the fact there is something to backlash against, suggests another (sub)culture exists and competes with hockey masculinity. This ‘other’ form of hockey masculinity values a safe game over an aggressive one, and an inclusive approach to players and fans with varying perspectives over a ‘boys club’ that holds ‘warrior’

masculinity dear. While it is not clear at this point that this other form of masculinity has replaced hockey masculinity, the existence of this tweet and of the responses supporting it point to a challenge to at least one important component (fighting) of hockey masculinity.

Indeed, the hegemony of hockey masculinity has been overtly challenged in recent years, through rule changes to reduce fighting and physical play, campaigns to broaden the NHL's fan base and promote inclusivity in hockey participation (Hockey Is For Everyone, 2019), and even backlash against hockey masculinity's greatest champion. In late 2019, Don Cherry, described as a "legend" (Klinkenberg 2019, para. 2) and the "the Prime Minister of Saturday Night" (Gillet et al., 1996, 59) by those in the hockey and research communities, was relieved of his duties at Hockey Night in Canada for making negative comments about immigrants and minorities in his *Coach's Corner* segment. It is important to note, however, that these challenges to hockey masculinity and hockey culture are not universally approved, and many other components of hockey masculinity remain mostly unchallenged. The importance of physical play, 'the code' and 'sticking up' for oneself and teammates when physically challenged (Allain, 2015; Bernstein, 2006) remains a constant part of hockey culture at all levels, including the NHL. Even as more attention has been brought to the ubiquity of concussions and to the extent of their detrimental effects on player's mental and physical health (Beaver 2018; Cabot 2017 Kelly 2017; Smith, Farrell, Roberts, Moris, & Stuart, 2019), coaches, players and fans still support 'playing through pain' and 'toughing it out' (Malcom 2006, Yeldon and Pitter 2017) when faced with injury. Alcohol, partying, and the objectification of women also remain pillars of hockey masculinity, and are not addressed in comments pertaining to the place of fighting on the ice (Roy and Camiré, 2017). Future research may further investigate future challenges to hegemonic hockey masculinity, in terms of the role of fighting and these other components. The tensions

created among fan segments who subscribe to hockey masculinity and to other conceptions of the sport's culture can also be examined.

As Manfredo and colleagues (2017) write, cultural backlash is a “phenomenon wherein those left behind in a shifting culture act in opposition to change for the purpose of retaining their cultural identity and values” (303). Many of the tweets written in response to the fight tweet are not only a backlash against Campbell and his opinion, but against perceived challenges to hockey masculinity's hegemony more generally. Tweets expressed anger not only at Campbell, who called them out as the “worst fans”, but also at his desire to change the sport's perceived character. Campbell's tweet seems to have been perceived by many as a challenge to the hegemony of hockey masculinity, and to the wider shift of many (though not all) away from this version of hockey masculinity.

Further, our findings are consistent with Inglehart and Norris' (2016) finding that changes to societal values “spawned a resentful counter-revolutionary backlash” (4) in political circles, marked by anger and resent. In the responses to the fight tweet, Twitter users employ aggressive and colorful language to refer to Campbell, including snowflake, pansy, beta, sissy, soft, and by feminine names like Nancy or Sally. This language is emblematic of the macho hockey masculinity subculture that many fans still subscribe to. In some responses, Campbell's masculinity is attacked indirectly by suggesting he ought to watch less “manly” sports like figure skating, synchronized swimming, gymnastics, or women's basketball. These responses are often written in a combative way, and while this may be partially a product of the nature of Twitter as a media platform, they are also characteristic of cultural backlash across contexts.

One of the defining characteristics of cultural backlash is negative attitudes towards others with differing backgrounds and lifestyles (Carreras et al., 2019; Gaffney et al., 2018). In

this case, the backlash in question is directed not at a group of migrants or ethnic minorities, but at someone who holds a different view on the role of fighting in hockey. However, while the subject of the backlash is different, the roots of this backlash may be quite like those of the populist political right. While we cannot be certain of what this backlash symbolizes, it seems to point to the expression of feelings of ‘masculinity in crisis’ (Allain 2015; Kusz 2008), similar to those felt by supporters of populist political parties. To these twitter users, challenges to hockey masculinity’s hegemony and to the role of fighting in hockey represent challenges to their own hegemonic masculinity and to their privileged place atop hockey’s hierarchy.

This is further evidenced by their questioning of Campbell’s hockey experience and expertise, stating that Campbell must never have played the game at a high level because he does not understand the purpose and importance of fighting and its historic place in the sport. Fighting, and the “old school hockey values” (Allain 2015; p. 124) it represents, symbolizes a past where male dominance of hockey culture and hockey discourse was implied and expected. Challenges to the hegemony of hockey masculinity are symbolic of perceived reductions to the role and place of men in society more generally. These feelings of loss and being ‘left behind’ echo those of many men on the populist right, who feel their place in society dwindling as trends towards inclusion and celebration of historically marginalized groups (non cis-gendered men, people of color, sexual minorities, etc.) occur, sometimes at their expense (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). More explicitly, Don Cherry has constantly positioned violent, physical hockey as the sport of the white working class (who make up a majority of the North American populist right), whose sport is under attack by “left wing pinkos” (Allain and Dotto, 2019).

The language, tone, and word choices described above also resembles the language used by the populist right and the North American political right at large, such as tweets referring to



Campbell as a “snowflake” (Schwartz, 2017) or “beta” (Roy, 2016). Messages questioning Campbell’s masculinity or decrying the “soft” nature of his opinion and of those who believe fighting should be removed from hockey also mirror populist distaste for “political correctness” and their desire to preserve traditional norms (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), including those of masculinity (Read, 2017). Calls for the preservation of free speech are also an important part of populist rhetoric against changing cultural norms (Read, 2017). Connected to right-wing populist anger surrounding society’s perceived shift to “political correctness”, tweets coded as *to each their own* displayed this desire to allow for differing viewpoints. These tweets were often coupled with resentment towards Campbell for his “holier than thou bullshit”.

A few limitations should be noted. The first is the inflammatory language in the fight tweet, which may have contributed to the amount of responses, tone of responses, and cultural backlash within the responses. To monitor and identify cultural backlash in a specific context such as sport, it is imperative that there is a triggering event that emblemizes the dominant discourse and progressive trend in context. Just as socially and culturally liberal political parties and policies (Inglehart & Norris, 2016) or progressive wildlife conservation policy (Manfredo et al., 2017) are needed to prompt cultural backlash in these contexts, a message expressing progressive ideas against the place of fighting in hockey is vital in providing a potential site for cultural backlash in this context. It is also important to note that we are unable to write conclusively on possible changes happening to hockey culture at large, as we can only speak to the fan and journalist representations we observed on social media.

Another limitation is that one tweet may not represent the overall opine over hockey fighting and the culture change. However, this tweet is in line with the general empirical trend in the NHL of reduced fighting, and the number of responses and range of attitudes toward fighting

represented in this thread offers a rich opportunity to assess discourse on this topic and the cultural backlash in the context of Twitter. Lastly, the short window of data collection (data was collected for eight days after the fight tweet was posted) may have excluded some of the later responses. However, given the nature of twitter exchanges and reply patterns, few replies were likely posted after our April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019 collection date. At the time of our data collection, 920 replies were collected, and as of September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2019, 900 replies existed on the fight tweet, due to users deleting their responses.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we examined cultural backlash in the context of sport, through the social media platform of Twitter. In observing backlash against challenges to the hegemony of hockey masculinity, represented by the Fight Tweet and shifting rules and norms around fighting, we found that cultural backlash can manifest in this previously unstudied sport context and can be observed effectively through Twitter. We discovered that cultural backlash can be expressed in multiple ways and is not limited to the explicit expression of approval for the past norm or culture. Examining fighting in hockey, Twitter users convey cultural backlash by belittling and attacking the person (Campbell) commenting negatively on hockey culture, decrying progressives' lack of understanding of this culture, and commenting on the problems that have arisen and will continue to arise if progressive trends continue and the norms of hockey masculinity disappear. In this case, expressions of backlash mirror the aggressive traits of hockey masculinity which they represent. They also symbolize crisis masculinity, using similar language and tone as those seen in expressions of backlash from the North American populist right.

This analysis extends cultural backlash literature by providing evidence of its existence in a new context and reinforcing the methodological importance of Twitter as a tool to study it.

Moreover, this research identifies previously unarticulated forms of cultural backlash expression, which can be used to better conceptualize this phenomenon. Future work in this area should have an eye towards this conceptualization of cultural backlash, in order to better understand where it is occurring, why it is occurring, and who participates in it. Research examining the links between preferences for hockey masculinity and more conservative political and social value preferences, as well as links with violent or destructive behavior, may also be of interest. The role of anger, masculinity, and anti-political correctness in more general cultural backlash research merits further study as well.

We have taken important steps in the process of conceptualizing cultural backlash as a social phenomenon, and have demonstrated the pervasive nature of cultural backlash beyond the political realm. We have also demonstrated the proposition that wherever cultural backlash exists, there is necessarily at least two coexisting and competing (sub)cultures: the one expressing backlash, and the one that is subject to backlash. Given deepening social and political divides throughout the world, evidenced in the continuing rise of populism and cultural backlash, further work in this area is needed, and cannot come soon enough.

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## Appendix A – Codebooks

### Thematic content codebook

Code	Description
Balanced take	User states that they can understand why some people want fighting in the sport, but also why some don't like it. Conversational, non malicious tone generally.
Belittling or attack	User expresses the view that Campbell, or his opinion, is soft, sissy, feminine, non-masculine, pansy, etc. This includes jokes about watching or writing about women's sports or non-combative activities instead, or jokes questioning or making fun of Campbell's masculinity
Fight commentary	Users comments on the fight itself, how it happened, what occurred in the fight, the result of the fight,
Fighting is bad	User expresses the opinion that fighting in hockey is bad for hockey, for the sport, for the players, or in general.
Fighting is consensual	User says that this fight, or fights in hockey at large, are consensual acts between willing combatants.
Fighting is necessary	User explains that fighting is necessary for the sport and in the NHL, usually in order to curb other rough play and stick incidents, and to make players accountable for their conduct on the ice
I like it	User state that they personally like or love fighting in hockey (in response to Campbell's prompt: "Who likes this?" in his initial tweet)
It's hockey	User expresses, in one of many ways, that this is how hockey is played, how it's always been played, and this is part of the game and its culture. This code is also used for tweets stating that the players themselves want fighting to remain part of the sport.
Just don't watch	User tweets a version of "if you don't like it, you don't need to/no one is forcing you to watch it".
Never played	User asks whether Campbell has ever played hockey, or states that he must never have played the sport at all or at a high level, because he clearly does not understand it
People like fighting	User states that many hockey fans and people in general enjoy fighting, again perhaps in response to Campbell's "Who likes this?" prompt
To each their own	User states that people should be free to enjoy fighting, and that Campbell or others generally should not litigate what others enjoy, and that they personally should not be criticized for their beliefs or opinions on a matter
Twitter commentary	Tweets that are part of a a back and forth Twitter conversation that have evolved past a comment on the original tweet, or users who are responding to or commenting

Disagreements with opinion

on the nature of Twitter itself, the comments already posted about this tweet, or other users' replies.

User disagrees with the Campbell's opinion expressed in the tweet, often just saying that he is wrong or that what he's written is a bad opinion

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